

Does Judaism and the Old Testament copy Zoroastrianism?

Intro

A common claim is that the exiled Jews of the 6th century BC copied the Zoroastrianism of the Persian empire. Exactly how this is supposed to have happened in a 20-70 year period (many returned in Darius' reign) when numerous key Canaanite practices (temple prostitution, high places, baalim) were rejected in Scripture in previous centuries is unclear. The rejection of foreign influence would've been a barrier (Neh. 13:1, 23) that if crossed, seems to have been more of a Canaanite syncretism issue than a Persian one (Neh. 13:26, 1 Kings 11:4-11).

The main ideas:

General (Physical) Resurrection

2. Final Judgment
3. Savior
4. Satan
5. Monotheism

Some info:

Avesta - the Zoroastrian scriptures

Denkard - A 9th century Pahlavi commentary that summarizes and in one case quotes a lost part of the Avesta (FrW 4.3)

Old Avestan - The oldest language in the Avesta, dated to before 1000 BC

Sassanian period - Sassanian empire: 3rd-7th century AD

Young Avestan - The second oldest language in the Avesta, dated to c.1000-600/500+ BC

1. General Resurrection

The doctrine is not in the oldest Avestan parts, the Gathas. When an individual dies, he travels to the Chinvat Bridge to be judged (Yasna 46.10-11). This seems to happen

individually, spiritually, and shortly after death, confirmed by the Young Avesta with the soul's 3 days wait near the body before leaving (Vend. 19)

One goes either to the House of Truth or House of Lies. Nothing else except a general "world renewal" (Yasna 30.9, 46.10-11). A physical resurrection is redundant and thus precluded because the individual is already at their destination - no need of a resurrection for the rest of the world to be renewed. So resurrection didn't naturally develop within Zoroastrianism, but must've been added later seeing this awkward "rejudging" of everyone.

Of the 5 refs to a bodily resurrection, all Young Avestan, 4 are doublets (Yasht 19.11, 19, 23, 89), so it's only two independent sources. Still, [Vevaina](<https://www.jstor.org/stable/24049224>) makes the undeniable point against Bremmer based on FrW 4.3 (Denkard 9.46) that this cannot be Zoroastrian "upvaluing" Christian resurrection during the Sassanian period.

Yet FrW 4.3 cannot, as Vevaina maintains, mean the doctrine "was an integral part...in the first millennium B.C.E., if not earlier." [Vevaina, 220] FrW 4.3 is a Young Avestan commentary on another Young Avestan text - Yasna 54, which implies no resurrection: here the incorporeal conscience, Daena, is rewarded just like in the Gathas and elsewhere in the Young Avesta.

So the bodily resurrection doctrine was added in the later Young Avestan stages. Vendidad 19 and Hadhoxt Nask 2, both Young Avestan, depict a 3 day wait by the spirit of a corpse until he goes to the Chinvat Bridge. The Vendidad's "tortured syntax" shows it's a post-Achaemenid compilation. [<https://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/vendidad/>] If at this point the resurrection doctrine was still not that prominent, it must've come late in the Young Avestan period.

More shows the doctrine's lateness in Zoroastrianism. In Yasht 19.11, 19, 23, 89, the Savior restores the world in the second half of those verses. But in the beginning of the first three verses "they" (the righteous) do so. This is the old concept in the Gathas that good people help in the Renewal (Yasna 30.9). In 19.89 the last Savior does everything (there's no "they"). The verbatim repetitions suggest a liturgical formula in a later phase. [Panaino (2019). *A Walk Through the Iranian Heavens*, 75 n.271] But it was clearly changed as the doctrine of the Saviors arrived - suggesting foreign influence and not internal development.

A fragment from Theopompus (late 4th cent BC historian):

ὁς καὶ ἀναβιώσασθαι κατὰ τοὺς Μάγους φησὶ τοὺς ἀνθρώπους
καὶ ἀθανάτους ἔσασθαι

"The last-named author [Theopompus] says that according to the Magi men will live in a future life and be immortal" [Loeb Classical Library, *Diogenes Laertius* I]

The keyword is "ἀναβιώσασθαι" (anabiosesthai): future tense of to "again (ana) live (bio)". Aeneas of Gaza calls it resurrection, but was probably influenced by Christianity (even as a neo-Platonist). Diogenes Laertius' quote is likely closer.

A physical revival?

Marcus Aurelius uses "anabio" metaphorically for one's renewed perspective (Meditations 7.2). In Aristophanes *The Frogs* 177, a corpse says: "αναβιοτην νυν παλιν" - "revive (me) now again", meaning to live again in some form, or the author wouldn't have said "παλιν" ("again") signifying the corpse's previous physical life.

A synonym "anazao" (Rom. 7:9) where the Law comes back to life. In Luke 15:24, 32 it's metaphorical for a person being saved, so context matters.

If Theopompus meant some sort of spiritual life on a New Earth/universe, it's a strange way of describing it as "living again and being immortal" - redundant since the Greeks already considered the soul immortal. He and the Young Avestan sources implies physical resurrection in Zoroastrianism by the 4th cent BC.

But when/how does it relate to the biblical one? Here the lack of mss of the Avesta ends the journey from the Zoroastrian side. Turning to the OT, Isaiah 24-27 is the best evidence Judaism already had the doctrine before Persian influence. The language is pre-exilic Hebrew, without Persian words unlike post-Exilic books (e.g. Chronicles) so the text isn't later than 500 BC. The Persian afterlife hadn't influenced Judaism by 400 BC (Eccl. 3:21).

If doctrines were taken from the Persians, one would expect the same veneration of fire/light, earth, and water (compare the fire-cult in the so-called Chaldean Oracles, composed in late Antiquity). According to Herodotus, the Persians wouldn't spit or urinate in rivers because of this. And in Plutarch's account of their eschatology, men are not hungry nor cast a shadow - showing the extent to which darkness was considered the realm of the evil Ahriman. Yet in Isaiah 24:1, 4 God strips the Earth bare, twisted, and it withers. In 24:23 the Moon and Sun are shamed. Already two of the Persian venerated elements are not respected. In 27:1, God defeats Leviathan in the sea, so we see that water is not exactly associated with absolute good or purity. The "cosmic judgment" in 24:21 has to be seen as metaphorical, seeing the "shaming" of the Moon and Sun in v.23.

Yet these aren't polemical, because the Earth is polluted by man's sins (24:5), light is still a good thing (26:19), as is water (27:3). Simply put, there's no evidence for Zoroastrian influence. The similarity in ritual impurity between the Avesta and Pentateuch are also either culturally similar, or the former borrowed from the latter - because an Avestan-like obsession with impurity minutiae doesn't come into Judaism until the Talmud. And contradictions such as disrespecting water by urination, yet cleansing by bull's urine, undoubtedly a leftover from when the religion was close to India, means the purification code has to be secondary in the Avesta.

Even in the 3rd century AD, Kerdir, a Zoroastrian priest, only speaks of a spiritual journey in the afterlife. [Sundermann, W. (2008). "Zoroastrian motifs in Non-Zoroastrian Traditions." *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 18(2), 161]

It doesn't make sense for the soul to be only temporarily in the house of truth or lies, then be resurrected and re-judged with another purification by molten metal. This shows that the final judgment was copied. The Gathas suggest the renovation is little more than the triumph of good: the good and evil each receive their rewards then (Yasna 43.5). These stay there a "long time" (Yasna 46.11, 16) and it's implied is the final destination (Yasna 51.15). And so a physical resurrection is probably copied and secondary as well (along with the New Earth).

The neo-Babylonian period saw many Western Semites, some of them in high positions. [Waezeggers (2024), *Personal Names in Cuneiform Texts from Babylonia (c. 750-100 BCE)*, 86] The Persians largely kept the previous administrative structure. Jews would've been ever-present in the Persian empire from the beginning. And we see this reflected in Ezra, Nehemiah, 1-2 Chr, Haggai, Zechariah, etc

It's not surprising that the Zoroastrians would syncretize Jewish beliefs. Henotheism was never a problem for them the way it was for Judaism. The Zoroastrian Darius I freely refers to Marduk in local Babylonian inscriptions. The Denkard 9.8.1-7 itself clearly uses Hesiod and possibly Daniel for the "four ages of man": golden, silver, *steel*, and "mixed with iron". Steel has replaced bronze as the metal of war, a qualification Hesiod makes for bronze. The Sudgar Nask 21.14 also has dwellings of gold, silver, steel, and crystal (because it's a positive thing unlike the mixture of iron).

2. Final Judgment

As noted above, the Gathas (Yasna 46.10-11) describe individual judgment, not a general final one. This is closer to the Egyptian one than the Judeo-Christian. If centuries of Egyptian cultural contacts didn't influence the OT on this point, then neither did 70 years of Persian contact

3. Savior

This doctrine is developed as shown by the inconsistency of whether the righteous make Renewal (Yasna 30.9, 34.15, Yasht 19.11a, 19a, 23a) or the final Savior (Yasht 19.11b, 19b, 23b, 19.89). Yasna 53.2 is clear that the righteous are the saviors who renew the Earth.

It is conspicuously absent from early Greek summaries of Zoroastrianism (Plutarch, *Isis and Osiris* 46-7), where he only mentions Mithra as "between" the good and evil gods (Ahura Mazda and Ahriman). Plutarch calls him a "mediator", a term never employed in the Avesta, and probably by this means a protector (e.g. of flocks) and one who maintains order.

He is judge in the afterlife only in Middle Persian (Sassanian) writings unlike in Yasht 10 where he only administers rewards and punishment in this life. In the Gathas and Young Avesta, one is already pre-judged by Daena, one's own works and thoughts, personified as a young maiden in the latter. So the concept of a Savior is later and unlike anything in Christianity. Not to mention the Messiah in the OT isn't detailed much besides suffering for sins (Isaiah 53, Daniel 9) and reigning

And thus the "Saoshyants" or Saviors (plural), do not include Mithra either, and are related to more of a cosmic battle than anything Christian

4. Satan

Satan is already found in Zechariah 3:1-2, and the book internally dates itself to c.520-18 BC. It's clearly not a new concept, and Ahriman is completely different in function and power.

The legends of Satan transforming into an ox and goring people and various other gruesome depictions come from much later, such as the biography of St. Martin of Tours (4th century).

5. Monotheism in General

The earliest Greek descriptions have the Zoroastrians with many other gods besides Ahura Mazda and Ahriman. These are also created/born according to Plutarch (*Isis and Osiris* 46-7). Monotheism is not something that was at all influenced from Persia, and the concept of Yahweh over all exists much earlier (Amos 9:7; Isaiah 10; 1 Ki 8:60, 20:28; 2 Ki 5:15, etc).